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T/V Pronouns in L2 Acquisition of Spanish

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Abstract: Many languages display a pronominal system in which there are both formal and informal forms to address others. In the L2 Spanish classroom, many English-speaking students unfamiliar with the T/V pronoun system (which is no longer present in English) often are only exposed to a generic set of rules (in the text and by the instructor) governing their usage. The system is a highly complex pragmatic phenomenon and can vary significantly based on factors such as dialect, familiarity, solidarity, emotion, and dispensation right. Lambert (1976) surveyed the phenomenon in Spanish and French and took into account familiarity, solidarity, and dispensation right. This study reports on a survey which tested the validity and reliability found in Lambert (1976) and furthered the study by examining the knowledge L2 Spanish students have about the use of the system of informal and formal pronouns and in addition to the parameters examined by Lambert, took dialect and emotion into account. The purpose of this study was to show that while a general rule governing T/V usage in L2 Spanish is sufficient to begin with, exposure to the natural language, explicit awareness of the phenomenon on the part of the instructor, and study abroad can all improve students' mastery of this pragmatic phenomenon. This information can be useful to language educators of all levels.

Keywords: Spanish, T/V Pronouns, Pragmatics, Language Acquisition, Teaching Methodology

1. Introduction

Studies in second language acquisition have shown that learners' acquisition of pragmatic features occurs relatively late. One of the most salient pragmatic features that has been a topic of increasing investigation since Brown and Gilman's study in 1960 is the formal/informal pronoun distinction. In languages with this distinction including many Romance languages, German, and Russian, second language (L2) learners normally are given a broad general rule during the early stages of acquisition and then are left to their own devices to learn the language-specific nuances. Most beginning textbooks of Spanish, for example, explain during the first chapter that Spanish has two forms for the pronoun 'you': *usted*, used in "formal" situations such as when speaking to an older person or a stranger, and *tú*, used in "informal" situations with a person of the same age or someone whom they know well. While helpful as a basic starting point for learners, this gross overgeneralization overlooks some important points which have been underexplored in the literature to this point: emotion, dialectal variation, and dispensation right.

Issues other than age that affect selection are often

overlooked by learners, such as status and emotion. Large differences in status are sometimes brought up in the classroom as examples, such as "addressing the president," but the situations are often so unlikely that students are unable to generalize to more day-to-day situations. One example is in the workplace, where an employee will likely use V (henceforth V will refer to the formal pronoun in the language and T will refer to the informal; we have chosen this conversion as in many countries *vos* is used in place of *tú*) to their boss where the boss will use T to the employee. Emotion, arguably the most subtle and unpredictable variable, is even more difficult for learners to apply to their address selection. If another driver is yelling at you for running into his car, their use of T can be anything but friendly. Likewise, if someone supposed to be on the "same level" as you with whom you assume there to be a certain amount of solidarity addresses you with V, this could be taken as a sign of distance or stiffness.

The second overlooked point is its language and dialect-specific nature. The previous example could be taken a completely different way, for instance, if the speaker was from Guatemala and V is the form they happen to use in most situations. On the other hand, in modern-day Spain and many

Latin American countries there has been a shift occurring in recent years. More and more, native speakers report that Spanish employees and bosses, as well as students and teachers, are using T with each other, in effect leveling the system. The final overlooked point in the usual discussion of the choice between T and V is dispensation right. That is; students are often unaware that their instructor addressing them with T is not necessarily an invitation to reciprocate.

Due to the lack of explicit instruction from the textbook, the L2 student has to rely on explicit instruction from the instructor or positive evidence, i.e., contact with the native language to learn each language's subtleties. There are a variety of ways in which language instructors can confront this dilemma. One way to guide the student to the preferred form is simply by telling them explicitly. For example in Spanish I might say, "*Tutéame, por favor*," meaning, "Use T with me, please" or in some cases, *¿Qué Usted?* (with prosodic emphasis on *Usted*) ¡*Tú!* This can also work the other way. For example, as an undergraduate I was walking with one of my Spanish professors, and we passed another Spanish professor's office. He, mentioned below, had requested that we use T with him. I peeked my head in and said, "*Oye, professor, fíjate que...*" to which the professor I was walking with corrected me saying, "*Fíjese que...*" (with prosodic emphasis on the *se*). To try and familiarize us with both forms, a Spanish professor I had as an undergraduate for a Spanish conversation class explicitly told us that for the first half of the semester, he would address us with T and we would address him with V. For the second half, he would address us with V and we would address him with T. The objective of this arrangement was to make the students more comfortable with the forms for both sets of subject and possessive pronouns as well as verb conjugations. (Of course, this only addresses the T-V distinction in the singular for Latin American dialects of Spanish, since it does not distinguish formal from informal in the plural).

It is worthwhile to point out that even when students begin to grasp the distinction between T and V subject pronouns, there is often a "mismatch" in pragmatics that occurs, where students will be inconsistent with possessive or object pronouns, or their lexical choices. This was the pet peeve of a professor of mine who preferred to be addressed by his first name, Salvador, but didn't mind being called Dr. or Prof. Rodríguez. If we opted to refer to him as Sal, he pointed out that we would then need to be consistent in using T with him. If we opted for Dr. Rodríguez, we needed to use the V. He even preferred the relatively informal, "*Hola Sal*" to "*Buenos días, Sal*" citing that *hola* was for a first name (FN) basis and the more formal *buenos días* was for the more formal title last name (TLN).

From a typological prospective in second language acquisition, English L1 students have a difficult time as the distinction is not present in English. Students who are L1 Spanish learners of L2 French, Italian, or Portuguese have what I like to call "differential training" in which they have the same underlying principles, but just need to acquire the language-specific nuances. The acquisition of nuances was a

key factor as we set out to identify the gap between L2 learners and native speakers in our study. In the summary of our study, we will further explore this gap, which can largely be attributed to lack of explicit instruction and sufficient exposure. We can use the data coupled with knowledge of pragmatic acquisition and the nature of the L2 classroom to point towards possible solutions to the T/V dilemma. One of the strongest cases to be made, as we will see, is the case for study abroad.

2. Literature Review

The basic framework for address theory was laid out by Brown and Gilman (1960). They cover the diachronic development of pronouns of address in Romance and Germanic as well as offer some theories into the semantics of the system such as the fact that pronouns of address can convey politeness or give insight into social hierarchies. Their work is more often than not the point of departure for many studies. Braun (1988) provides extensive coverage of forms of address, pronouns of address (on which our study is based), verb forms of address, and nouns of address. Braun also theoretically covers and provides examples from a wide variety of languages and typological diverse systems. An overview of the typology of politeness distinctions in pronouns can be found in Helmbrecht (2005). Of note are some basic terms Braun defines (based on Brown and Gilman): *Address behavior* is "the way individual speakers or groups of speakers use the repertory of address available to them"(13). For example, in modern English, students can refer to a college instructor by Title last Name (TLN) Dr. Smith, Professor Smith, or Mr. Smith and others can refer to him by First Name (FN) John. (In some dialects of English, such as here in Texas, Title First Name (TFN) is an option e.g., Mr. John. This appears at first to be a mismatch, but perhaps the title is one of respect, and the use of my first name is for familiarity.) Even within the TLN options there exist different connotations in English e.g., Dr. refers to holding a Ph.D. where Professor could refer to anyone who teaches at the university level. *Reciprocity* and *symmetry* refer to whether or not two speakers use the same (or equivalent) form of address as opposed to *nonreciprocal* or *non-equivalent* forms. Here, it is quite common for a student to address a professor with TLN, e.g., Dr. Smith and the professor refer to the student with FN e.g., John. She addresses a wide array of studies on the subject as well as statistical and methodological considerations—including a model language questionnaire that has formed the basis for many studies. Braun also covers a wide variety of variables e.g., family members, addressing God, children, animals, neighbors, places of employment, university, which branches out from Brown and Gilman's concentration on power and solidarity.

Dickey (1997) works with experimental data and focuses on the factors which influence the way one can be referred to stating "[the ways] are virtually infinite" (259). Her aim is to explain "how does the way that speaker A addresses B differ

from the way that A refers to B, and what are the factors affecting this difference?" (255). She focuses on nominal address forms (as little attention at the time had been paid to nominal address forms). Her study, "based on observation and interviews, attempts both to solve a problem in pragmatics and to help historical linguists and others who need to know the extent to which it may be justified to extrapolate from referential to address usage and vice versa." (255) Her conclusion based on her study of nominal forms of address is that accommodation theory can best explain her results. "This theory, which was developed in the early 1970's and has grown rapidly in the past twenty years, accounts for the ways in which people alter their speech patterns to their addressees and audience. (270). There is strong evidence in our study to support this as students who studied abroad patterned more like native speakers than did students who did not study abroad.

Uber 2011 updates the field further with her attention to the effect of context and focuses on data from Spanish used in the workplace and examined a wide variety of dialects of Spanish. She concluded from her study that "the determining factors for address are: the semantic concept of power (the age, rank of employee, or the perceived position of the addressee" and "the semantic concept of solidarity (the degree of confidence between speakers)." (258) Almasov (1974), Giglioli (1972), Uber (1984), and Uber (2004) all address contextualization of T/V pronouns.

The impetus for our study is Lambert (1976). The book contains three studies: A French-Canadian Study, a Puerto Rican study, and a Colombian study. It is worth noting the authors make great use of statistics in the studies which adds to their validity; however, in looking at the surveys, we found three main issues 1) They appear extremely cumbersome in terms of the time it would take to complete one 2) They contain Likert Scales, which are problematic in ascertaining such subjective information as whether one's mother or father is a "happy" or "sad" person and 3) They don't take context or situation into account.

3. The Study

A survey was conducted examining the use of T and V in Spanish targeting both native speakers bilingual in English and native English speakers learning Spanish in the United States. We began with basic demographic questions, e.g., age, gender, location, languages spoken, socioeconomic status, and level of education. We then asked the participants questions regarding their overt knowledge of the T/V distinction and asked them to rate how confident they were in their ability to use the correct form in a situation. At this point, while the directions remained in English, the questions were written in Spanish.

For example:

For the following people, indicate whether YOU would address THEM using the informal (tú) or the formal (usted). If you are unsure, please mark 'I am not sure' and give a brief explanation as to why you are unsure in the box below.

Please take your time; there are no "correct" answers; many of the situations are dependent on context and the individual.

Tu madre

Tú

Usted

Not sure

Comment

After a series of these questions eliciting how the speaker would address someone else and then how the speaker would expect to be addressed by someone else, the questions shifted to situations:

You just got a new job in a corporate office. Your first day is going great. You go about your business, meeting all of your new colleagues. From a distance, you see someone that looks familiar. As they come closer, you see that it's Nestor. You met him through your best friend at a party, and only know him in social settings. He comes up to say hello, and you discover he is your boss.

With which pronoun would you address Nestor? Tú Usted

With which pronoun would you expect Nestor to address you? Tú Usted

With all questions, a comment box was provided to allow participants to provide additional information, e.g., some commented that T was acceptable if others could not hear the conversation where V was appropriate when others could hear.

The surveys were conducted sent out online to random universities in the United States and abroad with geographical and dialectal variety in mind. The survey had 141 participants. The baseline for the survey was 44 native Spanish speakers who were bilingual in English to different degrees. They represented Spain, the Philippines, and over a dozen different countries in Central and South America.

4. Patterns in the Data

Following the literature review, the design and carrying out of the survey, we analyzed the data and identified patterns present, particularly the particular spots that constituted a gap between native and non-native speakers. In brief, the data from the survey showed that non-native speakers did not pattern drastically differently than native speakers in the majority of situations where traditional variables such as age and status were used (though they did show a tendency to err on the side of formality where the native speakers were more likely to use the informal pronoun). However, there was a noticeable disparity in the participants' (both native and non-native speakers) responses to situational questions involving more ambiguous variables such as solidarity and emotion.

One of the more "problematic" situations presented is a confrontation with a driver with whom you are furious because he/she has swerved into your lane. Using the Spanish survey as a point of comparison, while both native and nonnative speakers agreed that the situation was nonreciprocal, 71% of native speakers (NS) said they would

address the driver as *tú* while only 58% of non-native speakers (NNS) selected this response. Likewise, 44% percent of NS said that they would expect the driver to address them as *tú* while only 13% of NNS said the same. Another question involves the situation of a blind date who arrives late to meet you. While native speakers preferred the use of reciprocal *tú* (71% indicated they would use *tú* with them and 68% assumed that the date would also use *tú*), nonnative speakers showed a preference for the formal, 53% choosing to use *usted* with the date and 55% assuming the date will use *usted* as well.

The discrepancy in results on the above questions, coupled with what we can term the overuse of *usted* on the part of NNS, reveals a gap in command of pronouns of address across the board, from beginning to advanced students. How can we explain and address this lack? First, we should consider *where* students are getting their instruction. 65% of NNS surveyed indicated that they learned how to use forms of address through their professor explaining them, and 53% said that they learned them through the textbook. One participant commented “everything I know is from books and formal instruction,” and it would be reasonable to assume that this is representative of most of our NNS participants (excepting the 36% who studied abroad, who we will address later). Many native speakers (39%) chose the response, “I figured them out on my own” and 50% indicated that their parents were the ones who oriented them to the appropriate usage of these forms. As would be expected, very few (less than 6%) cited the textbook as a source of learning while 14% indicated that they were taught by a professor.

Though research has shown that there is a natural lag in the acquisition of pragmatics by L1 as well as L2 speakers (after all, even the pragmatic competence we gain as young children is often explicitly taught to us by parents or teachers), this simple fact of “late development” cannot count for the disparities we see. A large part of the problem arises from instruction and the fact that many current textbooks only address major factors such as age and familiarity, while largely ignoring the issues of dispensation, solidarity, and emotion. On the one hand, this is understandable due to the complexity and ambiguity of these factors. The trend in many textbooks to relegate pragmatic information to a parenthetical side-note (the familiar box entitled “¡Ojo!” or “*Nota cultural*” in Spanish texts, for example) necessitates simplification of these variables. Thus, the advice often given to students when discussing T/V pronouns is reduced to “when in doubt, use V.” This advice is well-guided, as its goal is to help students avoid committing the pragmatic blunder of appearing disrespectful in a social situation that calls for formality and deference, and many students take it to heart as we see in the results. Therefore, we could consider that the cautious use (to the point of overuse) of V is socially acceptable, yet does not lead students to the ultimate goal: command of the T/V system.

An example of the way an L2 speaker may remain “socially acceptable” while being seen as a bit “off” for using *usted* is illustrated by a comment made by a native speaker:

some people prefer to be addressed *tú*, feeling that *usted* could make a person “seem old.” The participant then makes the caveat that, on the other hand, there are others who prefer *usted* as a term of respect. Much of these preferences are doubtless influenced by regional dialect. As a Catalan participant pointed out, forms of address in Catalonia tend to be more informal than in Southern Spain, and Spain, in general, has for many years tended towards a more informal address than in Latin America. Another participant makes the astute comment that, even beyond the factor of region “There is also a very important idiosyncratic factor: regardless of what may be expected of someone in a particular social context, an extroverted or frank person might break conventions and lean towards the use of the informal pronoun if s/he considers that the amount of personal information shared with their interlocutor justifies this treatment.”

5. Addressing the Problem of Address

One problem we are faced with, then, is that the number of variables is simply too great to encompass them all. If we cannot give students a one-to-one correspondence of when to use T/V pronouns, then what can we give them? The insightful comments of non-native speakers who have studied or lived abroad as well as their more native-like performance on the surveys give us an important key. While not all students have the opportunity or can afford to study abroad, and thus cannot be immersed in authentic situations in the same way, we can provide them with some extent of exposure and contextualization. Textbooks will never be a replacement for authentic life experiences for acquiring pragmatic knowledge, but they are an important tool and guide. We have seen that their treatment of this important pragmatic feature is inadequate, and that the solution is not simply more lists that imply a one-to-one correspondence that can be memorized for each social situation, region, etc. Such a task would be daunting and unfruitful. What textbooks *can* do, then, is incorporate an abundance of authentic materials, such as texts and accompanying videos, where the pragmatic features can be observed. Many articles have been written on “teaching interventions” meant to guide students to a more native-like command of the T/V pronouns with varying degrees of success. What is needed to develop such a command, however, is not a one-time intervention or exposure, but an integrated approach where students watch, hear, and read authentic input over time.

6. What is Going on at a Theoretical Level

When we consider usage, we have to remember not only the learner’s speech but also the positive evidence that a student actually hears from an interlocutor. Is consistent exposure to the appropriate forms enough? Are the forms the students are using actually using the ones they most often

hear in templatic constructions? The answer to these questions is what we have been seeing all along: it is helpful and important, but not enough on its own. If we account for the role that we know that “chunk learning” plays, this would explain the fact that a student may not mismatch forms in the phrase *¿Cómo está Usted?* but may mismatch pronouns in a question like *¿Usted sabe que tu puerta está abierta?* even if they may know the appropriate pronoun *su* in the phrase *Mi casa es su casa*. However, we also know that learners have reported hearing phrases that are actually not in their environment and are grammatically or pragmatically inappropriate. Thus we see that the simple presence of positive evidence is not enough, as errors may persist despite the input of the environment.

7. Conclusion

Returning for a moment to the results of the study, it is notable that L2 students who studied abroad were the ones who patterned most similarly to the native speakers. This suggests that usage is truly the key. The more authentic exposure a student has to the variables that come into play, the more real the distinction will become to him or her. Obviously, committing a blunder in a foreign country by using an inappropriate form will result in a much more impactful learning experience than sitting in a Spanish class and memorizing rules for the usage of *tú* and *usted*. But is study abroad a one-size-fits-all answer? I would venture to say it is a very good answer, but even an immersion experience in a foreign country doesn't necessarily fill the gap. Consider the case of societies considered to be relatively “informal” in their address, especially among young people, such as Buenos Aires and Madrid. A student who studies in one of these cities and then returns to United States or travels to another country in Central or South America, continuing to address interlocutors as *vos* or *tú* regardless of their status will end up committing a pragmatic blunder. Ultimately, there has to be some level of social awareness on the part of the learner in order to adjust to different social realities, and I would argue that this awareness is not merely innate but is built through usage.

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